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**Mad Science from Beyond the Stars: New Perspectives on the Mad Scientist Trope through the Alien Scientists of *Stargate SG-1*.**

**ABSTRACT**

*Examinations of scientist characters in fiction focus almost exclusively on human scientists from terrestrial cultures, whether past, present or future. However, the Science Fiction genre offers the ability to depict extraterrestrial characters in the role of scientist. While some of these fit rather easily into general stereotypes of the scientist as mad, bad, and dangerous, others pose overt challenges for traditional categorizations. In doing so, they provide new perspectives and images of science in popular culture. Part of a larger project, this paper focuses on the extraterrestrial scientists of Stargate: SG-1 (1997-2007), analysing four examples in connection to the concept of the mad scientist to see how they reshape and engage with broader discourses of science. We can determine two types of extraterrestrial scientist: the human from another world, and the nonhuman – literally a biologically distinct entity. Both categories are examined here to provide a brief introduction to the dimensions of the alien mad scientist.*

**KEYWORDS**

Science Fiction  
Television  
*Stargate SG-1*  
Mad Scientists  
Cultural History

**SCIENTISTS AND STARGATES**

Fictional portrayals of scientists inform the images of science which circulate through public discourse, and these figures are often more prominent in shaping public perceptions than real scientists. This has changed slightly in recent years with figures such as Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins, and Neil deGrasse Tyson rising to fame as ‘celebrity scientists’ (cf: Fahy 2015). However, if we accept that at least part of the images of famous scientists are selective representations of their ‘real’ selves then so too are these figures somewhat fictional, at least in terms of what the public at large believe them to be. Much of the academic scholarship

about fictional scientists has focused almost exclusively on literature and film. While there has been some attention given to television scientists recently, especially in relation to high profile (but hardly new) series, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-ongoing) (cf: McIntosh 2014) there is has been little written about such characters in Science Fiction television (SFTV). Compared to its film and print counterparts, SFTV has only just begun to receive intensive consideration so in some respects that discrepancy is accounted for by broader trends. Nevertheless, there remains a substantial need to accompany the general work being done on SFTV with specific examinations of the science-related aspects and content of the programs. Indeed, scientists are highly prominent in many major SFTV programs making the paucity of attention to such texts particularly striking. Some of the available work on SFTV scientists makes useful contributions overall while focusing on less prominent examples (Forster 2009), while others use well-known series such as *Doctor Who* (1963-1989) in the case of Orthia (2011), or the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) in the case of Jowett (2008).

A major absence in scholarly work concerning SFTV is explicit consideration of the alien scientist. One of the main aspects that draws particular attention to the genre is its ability to display extraterrestrial cultures, and in doing so provide distinctive thought experiments around alien beings and civilisations. As such, we can look not only at scientists who are situated in contemporary or future Earth societies but at those that come from beyond the stars. Two types of extraterrestrial scientist can be distinguished from *SG-1*: the human, and the nonhuman – literally a biologically distinct entity.

Forming part of a larger research article, this paper focuses specifically on the alien scientists of *Stargate: SG-1* (1997-2007) – the longest-running North American SFTV series to date, and a franchise that continues to maintain considerable popularity nearly ten years after it ceased production. To further refine the scope, the analysis centres on discussions of the mad scientist trope. *SG-1* offers an interesting selection of alien scientists who directly interact with discourses regarding the mad scientist. By considering these characters alongside academic commentary we can gain new perspectives on what is arguably the most prominent singular classification of fictional scientists.

The primary justification for looking first at *SG-1* is that the series began as, and remained throughout its ten seasons, a heavily science-oriented show. This is not to say that it is or sought to be scientifically accurate, but rather that *SG-1* prominently features the conduct of scientific work with many narrative resolutions based on the ability of scientist characters to find a solution through research and specialist knowledge. In that regard, it links

into what Rohn (2006) has called ‘lab lit’. All of the main characters have varying links to science: Samantha “Sam” Carter (Amanda Tapping) is an astrophysicist as well as an Air Force Officer; Daniel Jackson (Michael Shanks) is a professional archaeologist, with particular talents for historical science and linguistics; extraterrestrial warrior, Teal’c (Christopher Judge) sometimes participates in scientific testing due to his knowledge of specific advanced technologies used by his former enslavers, the Goa’uld; and team leader/black ops veteran, Jack O’Neill (Richard Dean Anderson) has an amateur interest in astronomy that allows him to sometimes engage with scientific banter. Adding to the core members of the original SG-1 team are Dr. Janet Fraiser (Teryl Rothery) through seasons 1-7, and Dr. Carolyn Lam (Lexa Doig) in seasons 9-10 each of whom act as medical scientists and comprise part of the regular ensemble cast. A host of other scientists, engineers, technicians and specialists also appear throughout the series, but it is still the central figures like Carter and Fraiser around which scientific testing and practice is usually co-ordinated and undertaken. A detailed analysis of Carter, Fraiser, Jackson, and other Earth-based scientists from *SG-1* can be found in Gil (2016).

Unlike the scientists frequently depicted in films, the regular cast of scientists from *SG-1* tend to be multifaceted and complex characters not simply reducible to popular stereotypes. One reason for this is the screen time that each has over the course of the several seasons of *SG-1*. This is not to say that time necessarily engenders complexity – it will always come down to the individual writing and narrative – but time does allow for the characters to be placed in a range of situations that nuance their overall portrayal, and that is what happens within *SG-1*. Those scientists that will be discussed here are proximally closer to film characters as they only appear in either a single episode or handful of related but temporally separated ones. Even so, while participating within the tradition of the mad scientist they pose challenges to, or offer new insights into, that cultural figurehead of science gone awry or used to destructive ends.

## **MAD SCIENCE**

Although we all have a basic concept built from our cultural memories of the deranged figure who uses science to cause some monstrous disaster to befall themselves and humanity as a whole, the figure of the mad scientist is more complex than may be summarily thought. The mad scientist has been a perennial fixture in fiction for nearly two hundred years and is not always the villain. In the recent blockbuster, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), central

character Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) self-identifies as a mad scientist figure and there is also an exchange about this between he and Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo).

For some, the general depiction of scientists in fiction and popular culture tends toward the simplistic with mad scientists as one of a few negative stereotypes. Perkowitz (2010: 16) for example contends that while ‘Some movie scientists are realistically drawn ... many come in only one of three stereotypical flavors: evil, noble, or nerdy.’ Similarly, Wolpert and Richards (1997: 44) contend that with ‘few exceptions, if scientists are not mad or bad, they are personality-free, their measured tones and formal reports implying ways of thinking and working far removed from the intellectual and emotional messiness of other human activities.’ For others, it is the mad scientist that dominates fictional depictions. Using films as her subject, Pansegrau (2008: 259-63) determined four scientist stereotypes: the *eccentric*; the *hero/adventurer*; the *professional scientist*; and the *mad scientist* which she regards as ‘the most well represented type.’ Due to the proliferation of the mad scientist, Pansegrau (2008: 261-3) further separates the figure into three subcategories: the scientist ‘obsessed by the desire for power, fame, fortune, or the realization of their ideas’; the accidental ‘victim of his own research’; and the ‘world ruler’ who wants to control society or recreate it in their image. Acknowledging the same contrast between accidental and intended destruction, Tudor (1989: 133) writes, ‘though such ‘madness’ encompasses both the familiar obsessives, who devotedly and misguidedly seek knowledge purely for its own sake, and those traditional villains who want no more than to rule the world, all mad scientists share one characteristic ... [t]hey are volitional.’ In other words, all mad scientist willingly undertake their research, but blame may be apportioned less for the ‘unanticipated consequences’ than for deliberate efforts to cause harm.

One particular point of note is that the mad scientist effectively predates the coinage of the term ‘scientist’ that occurred in the mid-1800s. Schummer (2007: 76) draws a direct continuum contending the mad scientist ‘resulted from a transformation of the ‘mad alchemist’.’ In the oft cited catalogue of literary scientists developed by Haynes (1994: 3-4) the mad scientist is the *alchemist* ‘who reappears at critical times as the obsessed or maniacal scientist ... to pursue an arcane intellectual goal that carries suggestions of ideological evil.’ A major point of distinction cited by Schummer (2007: 77) is that while the alchemist’s ‘obsessive search for the philosophers’ stone harmed primarily himself (his health, wealth, and social status), the new ‘mad scientist’ did harm primarily to other people through his obsession with playing God.’ By playing God Schummer means taking on the power over life

and death but that is not a fully satisfactory description of the mad scientist's actions. Rather, playing God is more about taking on powers and abilities usually reserved for deities alone such as the creation of life or the alteration of nature.

### **EXTRATERRESTRIAL HUMANS – MALAKAI AND LINEA**

The first of the god-playing scientists that will be examined here is Malakai (Robin Mossley), an archaeologist who appears solely in 'Window of Opportunity' (4.06). Acting as the episode's antagonist, Malakai is responsible for activating a device capable of allowing time travel. However, the device proves faulty and uncontrollable and basically results in a *Groundhog Day* (1993) scenario where a short period of time recurs with only select characters – Malakai himself, O'Neill and Teal'c – aware that they are reliving the same day over and over again. Weingart (2003: 283) contends that 'medical research, physics, chemistry, and psychology are the disciplines that are portrayed with the greatest ambivalence' and thus the disciplinary sources of most mad scientists, whereas 'Anthropology, astronomy, zoology, geology, and the humanities ... are the fields that seem to have an unchallenged image of trust ... [and] scientists from these fields are in the large majority depicted as "good" and "benevolent."' This conclusion is not surprising given the potentials of research in fields differ significantly. As Weingart (2003: 284) proceeds to note, the humanities' 'methods of gaining knowledge (literature research and revelation of ancient knowledge) are not considered problematic' in the eyes of many filmmakers. Nevertheless, with Malakai we have a mad archaeologist. Given that in the world of the *Stargate* franchise ancient knowledge can provide power and the ability to operate technologies left behind by long dead civilisations, the humanities take on a different hue enabling fields such as archaeology which may not be the traditional birthplace of the mad scientist to give rise to a figure such as Malakai.

With more definitive links to the hard sciences, Linea (Bonnie Bartlett) offers a second example of the human scientist from another world. First appearing in 'Prisoners' (2.03) and encountered by SG-1 when they are imprisoned by an unseen but presumably (based on the other prisoners) advanced extraterrestrial human civilisation as the only other female in a prison colony besides Carter, Linea is curiously feared by other inmates despite her frailty and advanced age. Linea's largest challenge to the stereotype of the mad scientist is her gender. Overall this is a major departure from the norm but in the context of the series it is hardly inconsistent given the prominence of female scientists in *SG-1*. Counterbalancing

the fact that most classifications are built almost entirely on male characters, Flicker (2008: 247) offers seven categories of the female scientist in the place of other systems: the *old maid*; the *gruff women's libber*; the *naïve expert*; the *evil vamp*; the *daughter or assistant*; the *lonely heroine*; and the *clever, digital beauty*. We may suspect the evil vamp to be the fill in for the mad scientist but it is at best a poor and restrictive fit. Flicker (2008: 248) describes the evil vamp as 'remarkably good looking and young' behaving 'unscrupulously, egotistically, and is thoroughly willing to cooperate with' villains, she is also 'corrupt and uses her sex appeal to trick her male counterparts.' In contrast, it is the seemingly innocuous nature of the elderly Linea that makes her seem trustworthy at first and her assistance to SG-1 in helping them escape which solidifies that trust. Retrospectively, it is clear that Linea has in fact used the team to gain her freedom. Only when it is too late to stop her escaping again, this time from the Stargate facility on Earth that they find out she is the 'Destroyer of Worlds' who created a disease that killed half of a planet's population.

### **TRUE ALIENS – THE GOA'ULD, NIRRTI**

*SG-1* also offers a plethora of truly alien scientists, some of whom also engage with the mad scientist concept. One such character is Nirrti (Jaqueline Samuda), a member of the Goa'uld race who serve as the chief villains for the series throughout most of its run. Essentially, the Goa'uld are parasitic, snakelike creatures who take on other much larger beings such as humans as hosts and are able to control them from within. Nirrti is first mentioned in 'Singularity' (1.15) as the one responsible for killing the entire population of a planet and weaponising a little girl in an effort to destroy Earth's Stargate. She subsequently appears in 'Fair Game' (3.03) and 'Rite of Passage' (5.06), then finally in 'Metamorphosis' (6.16) where we actually see her conducting research. The basic goal of her work is to produce a genetically enhanced host with superhuman abilities. Her former eugenics experiments are now replaced by a device that allows her to alter DNA directly. Weingart (2003: 279) concluded from analysis of 222 fiction films 'that modification of, and intervention into, the human body, the violation of human nature, and threats to human health by means of science are depicted as the most alarming aspects of scientific inquiry.' Associating this kind of research back to the experiments conducted by Josef Mengele, Brake and Hook (2008: 240) note that the 'selfish pursuits of the isolated genius are particularly frightening when applied to the human genome. We may have been afraid of destruction at the hands of Strangelove and his ilk, yet more frightening is the idea that we will be transformed, that we will be

twisted by the machinations of science.’ That latter phrase describes exactly what happens to the people whom Nirrti experiments on: while they do indeed gain abilities such as telepathy and telekinesis, the process leaves them hideously scarred and deformed.

While we may be quick to condemn such acts as unethical and inhuman, we must remember that the being doing this is not human. That recognition leads to some new considerations. ‘Pretense’ (3.15) establishes that the Goa’uld see humans as livestock thus raising the question of whether we can consider their efforts to be immoral when human scientists perform experiments using ‘lower’ animals. Indeed, Harris (2010) actually asserts that such acts of a higher species on humans would need to be considered moral. As such, Nirrti goes from being the villainous mad scientist to merely a member of a higher order of life form conducting tests that may benefit herself (and her species if she wished to disseminate the results) in the process. This echoes what Sagan (1994) describes as the next ‘demotion’ of humanity, removing us as a species from the benchmark of ethical concern. In effect we could no longer say that humanity is exempt from or above any such manipulations. For Benedict (2004: 60) the ‘mad scientist embodies a contradiction: despite his very topic of inquiry, physical nature, he has denied his own physical existence and wants a power beyond nature.’ But it is not the denial of her physical existence but rather the reality of it that contributes to the rationale for Nirrti’s actions. Alone, she is a physically vulnerable symbiote with limited abilities. Even in a human body she must ultimately rely on advanced weapons and technology to augment her mortality and maintain the ruse of being a goddess. Therefore, an enhanced host would enable her to wield the kind of power beyond nature to which Benedict refers but in the service of circumventing the natural yet problematic facts of her bodily existence. Nirrti exemplifies some of the inhuman qualities ascribed to variations of the mad scientist, but does so in a markedly different way due to her status as an extraterrestrial biological entity.

## **CONCLUSION**

One major conclusion that may be drawn from even a short entry into the realms of alien scientists is just how contingent the many typological systems for classifying fictional scientists are on the sometimes limited range of examples to which they pertain. Alien scientists raise new points of interest for the study of science in popular culture, enabling us to look at our own ideas and society from new vantage points.

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